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## Q&A

*How did you become involved in doing research?*

I took Milton Wendland's "Studies in: Queer Film and TV" class the summer of 2012. During this class I learned that I could write on my favourite show through an academic and feminist lens. I was shown that academic work on film and television was a necessity in an ever-expanding media-based society. Milton taught me that we must be critical when watching shows because of the massive influence the media has on society and culture. I also learned that if I don't use my position of privilege as a student at a top research university to at least try to make a difference, I can't assume anything will change.

*How is the research process different from what you expected?*

It's a lot harder to find academic sources on my topic. Much of what I'm researching is in its infancy in terms of being studied at the academic level. There is also a huge disconnect between what is considered scholastic work and what is "merely fandom" in terms of analyzing *Doctor Who*. Given my focus on representation of women and minorities, it can be difficult to find published sources that were not written by cisgender, heterosexual, white men, which has shown me the gap in research that I aim to help fill.

*What is your favorite part of doing research?*

I love being able to write on my favourite show. I also greatly enjoy blurring the lines between traditionally scholastic work and the analyses done on various websites by fans. I enjoy bringing a feminist perspective into media research, particularly for a show with such a rich history of both progressive and oppressive narratives. I find it beneficial to have a plethora of voices and perspectives on any given subject, and my goal is to help make this a reality within my chosen research topic.

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# "Strong Female Characters" An Analytical Look at Representation in Moffat-Era *Doctor Who*

*Nichole Flynn*

## ABSTRACT

The current era of *Doctor Who*, beginning in 2010, under showrunner Steven Moffat has presented a downward trend in the representation of nuanced female characters, as well as racial and sexual minorities. This essay will be analyzing the representation and presentation of the three main female companions under Moffat's run as showrunner, as well as those few characters of minority sexualities and racial identities. This discourse will be made through an intersectional feminist perspective with a focus on feminist TV studies, critical race theory, and queer theory. The key concepts to be included are that of agency, heteronormativity, and the male gaze.

Moffat's female characters are limited in the roles in which they are allowed to fill. While Russell T. Davies' (showrunner from 2005-2009) companions had a range of personal and public conflicts and issues, Moffat's companions are shown to only fulfil the "traditional ideal feminine roles [which] has four dimensions: fulfilling cultural standards of beauty and fashion, performing domestic/family skills, caring for and satisfying the needs of others, and acquiring male attention." Each of the three major female characters created by Moffat are shown to only have agency when fulfilling one of these four dimensions.

Premiering on November 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1963, *Doctor Who* was the brain child of Canadian film and television producer Sydney Newman and English film and TV producer Verity Lambert. Originally, *Doctor Who* was a science-fiction show meant to use time travel as a tool to educate a young audience about history. The first Doctor was a grouchy old man played by William Hartnell who travelled with his grand-daughter Susan Foreman and two secondary school teachers, Barbara Wright and Ian Chesterton. The Doctor is a Time Lord from the planet Gallifrey who travels around the cosmos in his TARDIS (Time and Relative Dimensions in Space), a spaceship disguised as a 1950s Police Public Call Box. He is over 1000 years old and has the ability to regenerate upon death; an attribute which has allowed the show to continue over the last 51 years with over 12 actors (all white men) portraying the titular role of the Doctor. Over 80 characters, male, female, and robotic, have travelled with the Doctor as his companions. Typically, the main companion has been young, white<sup>1</sup>, attractive, and female, often from contemporary Britain. It is through these companions that the audience is introduced to the world of the Doctor. During the long history of *Doctor Who*, there have been various show runners, and the show has gone through numerous changes in how the Doctor and companions

interact. While there were definitely problematic aspects to the Doctor/companion relationships in Classic Who, those characters are not the focus of this essay. Neither are the incredibly nuanced, although still problematic in their own sense, characters written by previous showrunner Russell T. Davies<sup>2</sup>; instead, I will be discussing the highly sexist, often racist, and frequently homophobic writing for *Doctor Who* under current showrunner, Steven Moffat. It is important to note that “showrunner” refers to Moffat’s position as head writer and producer of the show. Thus, even when an episode is not penned by him, he still holds executive power in regards to what makes it into the final product and therefore should be held accountable for problematic elements of scripts written by the other (white men) writers on his staff.<sup>3</sup> Moffat has also written or co-written half of the episodes aired during his era<sup>4</sup> and has only employed eleven other writers over the last four years<sup>5</sup>. Ergo, the overarching look and feel of the show is to be attributed to Moffat.

The current era of *Doctor Who*, beginning in 2010, has presented a downward trend in the representation of nuanced female characters, as well as racial and sexuality minorities. By this I mean that the characters created and written predominately by Moffat are less dynamic or “realistic” than

those written by his predecessor. One of the ways this has been studied is via the use of infographs that chart the pass/fail rate of each episode in regards to the Bechdel test.<sup>6</sup> However, while important, passing the Bechdel test does not necessitate that a piece of media is “feminist” or “progressive” narratively. Thus, this essay will be examining and analyzing the representation and presentation of the three main female companions: Amelia (Amy) Williams nee Pond, Melody Pond/River Song, and Clara (Oswin) Oswald as created by and written during Moffat’s run as showrunner, as well as those few characters of minority sexualities and racial identities.

While *Doctor Who* has been written about extensively in various fields, there has been a lack of feminist scholarly discourse on the series<sup>7</sup>. Most of the feminist critiques of the show have occurred outside of the academic realm, most notably on Tumblr, a blogging platform which allows for the sharing of ideas and criticisms among a diverse fan base. Much of my own analysis of the show has occurred on Tumblr in part due to the active and insightful, if non-academic, running feminist critiques of Moffat and the show at large that are prevalent on certain blogs<sup>8</sup>. My desire when writing on *Doctor Who* is to blur the lines between “academic” and “fan” in an attempt to break down elitist

<sup>1</sup> Martha Jones (2007-2008) was the first and remains the only black female reoccurring companion.

<sup>2</sup> Who, along with executive producer Julie Gardner, successfully revived the show in 2005 after a sixteen year hiatus from television (broken only temporarily in 1996 with the televised movie *Doctor Who: The Movie*).

<sup>3</sup> It is also important to note that there has not been a woman writer on the *Doctor Who* staff since Helen Raynor, whose last written two-part episodes, “The Sontaran Stratagem”/“The Poison Sky”, aired in the spring of 2008. There have only been two women directors during Moffat’s tenure: Catherine Morshead, who directed two episodes in series 5 (“Amy’s Choice” and “The Lodger”); and Rachel Talalay, who directed the two-part finale of series 8 (“Dark Water”/“Death in Heaven”).

<sup>4</sup> 28/57 as of December 2014; he is also scheduled to write or co-write three of the first six episodes of series 9.

<sup>5</sup> More information about the production aspects of the show can be found on the “List of *Doctor Who* serials” Wikipedia page.

<sup>6</sup> Named for Alison Bechdel, the Bechdel test is a litmus test for the presence of female characters in a piece of media. In order to “pass,” a film or TV show must include (1) at least two named female characters, (2) who talk to each other, (3) about something other than a man or men. For more information on the test in general: <http://bechdeltest.com/>; for more information on the Bechdel test as it applies to *Doctor Who*: <http://www.doctorwhotv.co.uk/how-often-does-doctor-who-pass-the-bechdel-test-71608.htm>

<sup>7</sup> As of the writing of this essay, there has only been one book published which analyses *Doctor Who* through use of critical race theory: *Doctor Who and Race*.

<sup>8</sup> For further reading, see these feminist *Doctor Who* blogs: <http://dwfeministwatch.tumblr.com/>, <http://feministwhoniverse.tumblr.com/>, and <http://whovianfeminism.tumblr.com/>.

boundaries of who can be a “critic.” I also aim to help create a more nuanced understanding of the show within a feminist perspective. In order to achieve such lofty goals, this analysis will be made through an intersectional feminist perspective, as understood through the works of Kemberle Crenshaw, with a focus on feminist TV studies, critical race theory, and queer theory; it shall explore the concepts of agency, heteronormativity, and the male gaze, as presented within the narrative of the show.

The first of these concepts, agency, is one of the fundamental cornerstones of feminism, particularly in relation to what I call “fandom feminism,” which refers to individuals who, like myself, critically analyze popular culture while embodying feminist ideology in their worldviews. “Agency is the ability for a person, or agent, to act for herself or himself. A person who is not allowed to act for her/himself is lacking in agency, or is said to have been denied agency. In geek circles, women (real and fictional) often lack agency compared to their male counterparts<sup>i</sup>.” This can be seen throughout Moffat’s era as many of the female companions’ choices are made due to the overwhelming influence of the Doctor. Moffat’s female characters are limited in the roles in which they are allowed to fill. While Russell T. Davies’ companions had a range of personal and public conflicts and issues, Moffat’s companions are shown to only fulfil the “traditional ideal feminine roles [which have] four dimensions: fulfilling cultural standards of beauty and fashion, performing domestic/family skills, caring for and satisfying the needs

of others, and acquiring male attention<sup>ii</sup>.” Each of the three major female characters created by Moffat are shown to only have agency when fulfilling one of these four dimensions.

These “traditional ideal feminine roles” in which the companions are repeatedly forced into is a result of a heteronormative worldview. “Heteronormativity means . . . that heterosexuality is the norm, in culture, in society, in politics. Heteronormativity points out the expectation of heterosexuality as it is written into our world. . . . It means that *everyone and everything is judged from the perspective of straight*<sup>iii</sup>.” Thus, heteronormativity refers to the accepted narrative that people fall into distinct and complementary genders (man/woman) with natural roles in life. “On the majority of television shows heteronormativity operates in the exact same way it does in society: invisibly<sup>iv</sup>.” While heteronormativity is present throughout the show, it is perhaps most insidious in the representation of the only reoccurring queer couple, Madame Vastra and Jenny Flint, a dynamic discussed later in this essay.

Whovian<sup>9</sup> Piers D. Britton, author of *TARDISbound: Navigating the Universes of Doctor Who*, argues that Amy Pond’s narrative is a “subversion of [heteronormative] patterns” established previously on the show because she “is far less conventionally ‘romantic’ . . . [and is] both confident and frankly unsentimental about sex, and more specifically about her sexual attraction to the Doctor. . . . Amy’s sexuality is in many ways a defining element in her persona simply because it is overt and unapologetic<sup>vi</sup>.” However,

this reading of Amy ignores the prevalent use of the male gaze during scenes in which Amy is onscreen, particularly during the “reveal” of grown-up (19-year-old) Amy as a kissogram. While Amy may have some degree of agency in her actions and wardrobe,<sup>10</sup> how she is shot during these scenes greatly impacts the effectiveness of said agency within the narrative. Britton also glosses over the fact that “Amy brazenly trying to kiss [the Doctor] and unbutton his shirt<sup>viii</sup>” while the Doctor is shown to be visually uncomfortable is an act of sexual assault<sup>11</sup>. While this scene does establish that Amy has some degree of agency, her agency is only in relation to her sexuality and frequently presented via the male gaze. This scene is the first of several examples of sexual assault during Moffat’s era, and like those to come, this one is played for laughs. I go into further detail of this unfortunate trope in Moffat’s writing later on.

“The male gaze,” while a noticeable aspect of cinematic history, was unnamed until Laura Mulvey’s 1975 article *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female form which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. Woman displayed as sexual object is the leit-motif of erotic spectacle . . . she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire.<sup>viii</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Whovian: one who watches/is a fan of *Doctor Who*.

<sup>10</sup> Actress Karen Gillan has stated on the record that Amy’s micro-miniskirts were her idea.

<sup>11</sup> *Doctor Who* 5.5, “Flesh and Stone”

The male gaze is also a way of filming in which the female subject is segmented into various body parts (called fragmenting) before being presented as a complete person. This type of character presentation is a form of objectification which limits the empathy the audience feels towards the character in question. In Moffat's era, the male gaze litters the show, from the upward panning of Amy Pond in her introduction as an adult in "The Eleventh Hour" to the between the legs upward panning of Jenny Flint in "The Crimson Horror."

### AMY POND—THE GIRL WHO WAITED

Amelia Pond first meets the Doctor as a young child. She quickly becomes enamored with him due to his eccentric ways and his promise to take her with him on his travels. However, what has been five minutes for him has been "twelve years and four psychiatrists<sup>ix</sup>" according to a grown-up Amy Pond. Adult Amy's first appearance is via a slow lingering shot from her legs up while dressed in a police woman kissoqram costume. This fragmentation of Amy in her introduction results in numerous references to Amy's legs throughout Moffat's era, including long after Amy has left the show.

It is implied in her introductory episode that much of her childhood has been shaped by the seeming abandonment of her parents as well as her sporadic and strange encounters with the Doctor, previous to her becoming a full-time companion. Thus the instant sexualization of Amy is made even more unsettling due to the previous introduction of her character as a

lonely seven-year-old child whose name the Doctor says is "a bit fairytale<sup>x</sup>". Thus when adult Amy (who shortened her name due to the Doctor's influence) is overtly sexualized both by the filming of the scene and the narrative, it is implied that her sexual agency is caused by a lack of parental guidance and her abandonment by the male character. However, Amy is given very little screen time to process or express her emotions regarding her clear abandonment issues. Amy's mental health issues are ignored throughout her time as a companion, and her history of "four psychiatrists" is never brought up again in the series. Amy endures a great amount of trauma during her time as the Doctor's companion. According to Moffat, "part of the mission statement when writing a script for *Doctor Who* is how bad of a time can you give Amy Pond?<sup>xi</sup>" This is made quite clear during Amy's two and a half seasons as the Doctor's companion.

Amy is continuously used as a plot device. She is given little to no agency within her life, and her history becomes so dependent on the Doctor's that her life begins to unravel without him. During one of the Doctor's many absences from Amy's life, she and her husband Rory have separated and just filed for divorce. This dismantling of her seemingly perfect marriage is apparently caused by Amy's sudden infertility, which is implied to have occurred due to the hostile and experimental nature of her "Mystical Pregnancy" in series six. Well-known feminist blogger Anita Sarkeesian discusses this common phenomenon in her YouTube series *Tropes vs. Women*. In episode

five, "The Mystical Pregnancy," Sarkeesian explains that when an author uses this trope, they are removing the autonomy of the female character and instead is using their body to move the plot along. This is exactly the case with Amy who undergoes two mystical pregnancies during her tenure on the TARDIS.

The second time<sup>12</sup> Amy is revealed to be pregnant, she believes it to be a mistake after showing no physical changes after a few months. However, Amy has actually been replaced with a doppelgänger made out of intelligent flesh while the real Amy is indeed pregnant and has been kidnapped and locked in a room strapped to a bed awaiting her time to give birth<sup>13</sup>. One Tumblr user states that "part of Amy's mystical pregnancy allowed Karen Gillan to be sexy and running around in a mini skirt while all the while being fat, hormonal and [pregnant] behind closed doors. She needed to give birth but we needed to still be able to perve<sup>xii</sup>." This swapping of Amys and her hidden pregnancy is an overarching theme of the first half of series six, which has the Doctor scanning Amy without her knowledge in every episode as he tries to figure out how she can be both pregnant and not pregnant. While the narrative portrays the Doctor's repeated scanning of Amy and unwillingness to disclose pertinent information to her as being for Amy's own good, these actions are invasive and done without Amy's consent or knowledge. Not once does this season focus on Amy's feelings regarding pregnancy or starting a family. Instead, the Doctor is allowed to keep his theories secret from Amy,

<sup>12</sup> The first time is in episode 5.7, "Amy's Choice": Amy finds herself very pregnant and must choose between two realities, each of which has an aspect of life she desires but that apparently cannot co-exist. Namely, she can either travel with the Doctor having adventures, or she can settle down in a quiet town with her husband and raise a family. At the end of the episode, however, it is revealed that neither scenario was real, and that the three characters were trapped in dual dream states caused by Amy's insecurities and alien dream dust.

<sup>13</sup> *Doctor Who* 6.1/6.2, 6.5/6.6, 6.7; "The Impossible Astronaut"/"Day of the Moon", "The Rebel Flesh"/"The Almost People", "A Good Man Goes to War", respectively.

thus putting her physical and mental health in jeopardy; as stated earlier, it is due to this forced pregnancy that Amy is rendered infertile.

This narrative arc is problematic and sexist for several reasons. First, the narrative strips Amy of any and all agency regarding her body and her reproductive choices. She is repeatedly lied to and denied important information and thus is not allowed to participate in the rescuing of her actual body. Instead she is regulated to a “damsel in distress,” and is not told about her predicament until the Doctor has figured out what is going on. Even then, all she is told, before effectively being killed by the Doctor, is that the body she has been living in for the past several months is a doppelgänger and she is given the ominous message to “push, but only when she says so<sup>xiii</sup>”. After being obliterated by the Doctor, Amy awakens to find herself strapped to a hospital bed in a dressing gown about to give birth while her captor, Madame Kovarian, watches through a window in the door. Shortly after giving birth, her daughter is violently taken from her during the Battle of Demon’s Run, in which several brave individuals fought and died protecting her and her child. While Amy is given some screen time to process this emotional trauma, the scene does not last very long and the only form of comfort she receives is when the Doctor (allegedly her best friend) asks her husband Rory for permission before hugging her. Although this scene is short and may seem trivial, this is a reoccurring component of Amy’s arc on the show, and thus implies the male ownership of Amy by her husband. While typically the Doctor addresses Amy as “Pond,” during moments of emotional duress or potential platonic intimacy, the Doctor refers to her as Amy Williams. These moments are then followed by Rory granting permission to the Doctor,

allowing him to comfort Amy. Narratively these scenes add nothing except to reinforce the patriarchal idea that women are owned by the men in their lives, in these instances by their husbands. Once married, “Amy becomes the possession of her husband and is made an object to trade between the men. Every time the Doctor wants to hug her, he addresses Rory:

The Doctor: ‘Permission?’

Rory: ‘Granted.’

This scene is repeated so often that the Doctor no longer specifies what the permission is for<sup>xiv</sup>. While each of these encounters is played as a joke, the control is real. Rory is given the power to decide if and when Amy is allowed comfort from her best friend. Sexism passed off as harmless humour is a very common form of misogyny in the media and by portraying sexism through jokes, *Doctor Who* (and by extension Moffat) is presenting these actions as acceptable to the audience.

Another major problematic element of the use of the mystical pregnancy trope is that it links Amy’s worth to her ability to reproduce. As mentioned earlier, during one of the Doctor’s absences from their lives, it is revealed that Amy and Rory are getting a divorce due to Amy’s sudden infertility brought on by said mystical pregnancy. This minor subplot of series seven presents Amy as feeling like less of a woman due to her inability to have children. By placing so much value on a woman’s ability to reproduce, the narrative is saying that infertile women are less than their childbearing counterparts.

Although the introduction to series seven emphasizes Amy and Rory’s increasingly separate lives due to their impending divorce, their conflicts are seemingly resolved by the end of the first episode. This is despite Rory telling Amy that a “basic fact of our relationship is that I love you more than you love me<sup>xv</sup>.”

This statement by Rory trivializes the numerous traumatic experiences Amy has undergone during the last two seasons, including those involving her expressing her love for Rory. By having the male character emotionally blackmail the female character and then immediately follow that up with the reconciliation of said relationship, Moffat is telling the audience that if one’s partner is not acting in a way deemed appropriate by them, they have the right to attempt to control them via emotional abuse. Between this example of emotional abuse, and the previously described repeated instances of Rory controlling who Amy is allowed to interact with, their relationship is unequal and unhealthy, problematized even more so due to the narrative insistence that this is a great love story.

“The main purpose of Amy Pond was always for her to be the mother of the magical child who would be both the Doctor’s Girlfriend and Ultimate Foe. This was Moffat’s long game. Her relationship with the Doctor was predestined not because of her own, unique self but because of what would be in her uterus<sup>xvi</sup>.”

## RIVER SONG—THE WOMAN WHO KILLS/MARRIES THE DOCTOR

While Amy is subjected to a fair amount of misogyny during her tenure aboard the TARDIS, her development remains stronger and less narratively convoluted (and racist) than that of River Song. River Song has been heralded as the pinnacle of the “strong female character.” On the outside, she is an ass-kicking, gun-wielding, archaeologist with insider knowledge of the Doctor. However, below the surface River is a character with very little to no actual agency. Her entire life, from conception to death, is defined by or around the Doctor, including her chosen name of River Song.

River is initially introduced during Davies' era in the Moffat penned two-part episode "Silence in the Library/Forest of the Dead." During these episodes, River is established as an important figure from the Doctor's future. While this is the first introduction of River, this episode also signifies the end of River's life as she sacrifices herself to save the Doctor. Shortly after Moffat's start as showrunner, River is brought back at a much earlier point in her timeline. River's true identity is then hinted at for the next season and a half until it is revealed that she is the "Child of the TARDIS." Conceived within the time vortex, River Song, born Melody Pond, is Amy's child who was stolen at Demon's Run by a sect of the religious order "The Silence" run by Madame Kovarian. River is thus kidnapped, heavily brainwashed, abused, and fashioned into "the woman who kills the Doctor<sup>xvii</sup>."

In the episode following River's "big reveal" as Melody, we are introduced to a much younger Melody who is shown to have grown up alongside Amy and Rory as their mutual best friend, Mels<sup>14</sup>. This regeneration of Melody marks the only instance of a named black Time Lord in the history of *Doctor Who*. However, this depiction of Mels is during a short montage of anti-authoritative and criminal behaviours, all occurring before the opening credits of the episode. As the montage progresses, so does the seriousness of Mels' crimes, starting first with detention and ending with jail. In each of these instances, Amy is shown waiting for Mels' release, thus juxtaposing the "lawful" white woman with the "criminal" black woman. Mels' short screen time is ended when she is shot and killed by Adolf Hitler after hijacking the TARDIS. Mels then regenerates into

the form best known as River Song, an older, attractive white woman who quickly falls in love with the Doctor, seemingly overcoming lifetimes of programming, adopts the name River Song because of the Doctor, and sacrifices her remaining regenerations in order to save the Doctor. By the end of the episode she is shown applying to the Luna University in the year 5123 to study archaeology because she is "looking for a good man<sup>xviii</sup>," referring again to the Doctor.

Every major event in River's life is orchestrated by either the Silence or influenced by the Doctor, including the large span of time she spends in a high security prison after being convicted of killing the Doctor, who leaves her there in spite of him being very much alive. Nearly all of River's scenes are shot via the male gaze, including lingering shots of her cleavage, the upward panning of her body, and numerous sexist and sexual remarks made by the Doctor. These include the Doctor referring to Amy and River as "The Legs" and "Mrs. Robinson" respectively. These are two nicknames deeply rooted in sexism and are used to objectify Amy for wearing short skirts and sexualize River for being an attractive older woman. While the Doctor and River's relationship is portrayed as an epic love story transcending time and space, it is in reality largely one-sided and extremely abusive.

There are many instances of abuse depicted in this relationship, each of which are passed off as romantic. In the mid-season finale of series seven, River's wrist becomes trapped in the grip of a Weeping Angel. While she asks the Doctor for help, he insists that she change the future directly after telling her that this event is unchangeable, leaving her to escape on her own.

This results in her having to break her own wrist because the Doctor read that it would happen in a book. While this could be considered a moment of agency for River, regardless of how grim the situation is, she ultimately only breaks her wrist because of the Doctor. Her only real agency comes in her attempt to hide her broken wrist from him, but even this action is motivated by the fear that he would become angry with her. When asked why she does this by Amy, she replies with "never let him see the damage. And never ever let him see you age. He doesn't like endings<sup>xix</sup>." River's only true moment of agency is in the series six finale when she decides not to kill the Doctor during a fixed point in time. However, this action is motivated by River's apparent love for the Doctor, agreeing only to reverse her decision if he marries her<sup>15</sup>.

This wedding, while manipulative, is the second wedding to be shown in two seasons; thus marking the first time in *Doctor Who* history where all of the companions are in heteronormative relationships. Though subtle, by having all of the main characters married the show is saying that marriage is the end-all-be-all of a relationship. By having the titular character, who is a thousand-plus year old alien who has been in numerous relationships of all kinds in the past, marry in a wedding that is the crucible for the episode's plot, the show is sending the message that in order for a relationship to be valid, the couple must be married. These portrayals of relationships and the focus on marriage as the end goal is heteronormative and homophobic, as well as diminutive of the Doctor's previous relationships which did not end in marriage but were just as valid. When included under Davies, weddings and marriages were shown as normal events, not the

<sup>14</sup> *Doctor Who* 6.8, "Let's Kill Hitler"

<sup>15</sup> *Doctor Who* 6.13, "The Wedding of River Song"

defining moment in a character's life. Instead, commitment was shown through actions and loyalty, by the characters treating each other with love and respect. This is very unlike Moffat's depictions of relationships; Amy is emotionally abused and controlled by Rory, as discussed previously, and the Doctor lies to and manipulates River constantly. By having every romantic onscreen relationship end in marriage, Moffat is sending the message to viewers that these are the only relationships worth pursuing. This is especially harmful to young girls who are witnessing these seemingly strong female companions being treated as incomplete or less than because of their marital status. Coupled with Moffat's belief that "There's this issue you're not allowed to discuss: that women are needy. Men can go longer, more happily, without women. That's the truth. We don't, as little boys, play at being married—we try to avoid it for as long as possible. Meanwhile women are out there hunting for husbands<sup>xx</sup>," these scenes of "strong female characters" being defined by their spouses is sexist.

### QUEERING HETERONORMATIVITY— MADAME VASTRA AND JENNY FLINT

The only deviance from this heterosexual marriage motif established in Moffat's first two seasons is in the case of Madame Vastra, "a lizard-woman from beyond the dawn of time<sup>16xxi</sup>" and her human wife Jenny Flint. These women are an interspecies lesbian couple living in Victorian London, used primarily in the narrative for shock value and homophobic jokes. While they are a lesbian couple, they are presented heteronormatively

in "Deep Breath,<sup>17</sup>" with Vastra embodying the dominant "man" and Jenny as the objectified, subservient "woman." This power imbalance is made even more insidious considering that while Vastra and Jenny are married, "for appearance's sake, we maintain a pretense, in public, that [Jenny] is my maid<sup>xxii</sup>." However, this line is followed by Jenny saying "doesn't exactly explain why I'm pouring tea in private," followed by Vastra hushing her. In every scene during this episode in which Vastra and Jenny interact, there is an obvious power difference between the two; this is including the first and only kiss between them (to date) in which Vastra uses her stored oxygen to aid Jenny in breathing. Thus, their first kiss is actually an exchange of oxygen and not a romantic kiss like those the heterosexual couples have been able to share.<sup>18</sup> In fact, Jenny is actually sexually assaulted by the Doctor in the previous episode to feature her.

In this scene, the Doctor forcefully bends Jenny over and kisses her in a shot reminiscent of the iconic VJ Day "Sailor Kiss," which was also a non-consensual kiss<sup>xxiii</sup>. Jenny then slaps the Doctor, who laughs while saying "you have no idea how good that feels<sup>xxiv</sup>." This scene is quickly followed by what should have been a powerful moment for Jenny as she sheds her restrictive Victorian garb to reveal a leather fighting outfit in order to defend against a group of assailants. Instead, she is overtly sexualized by both the Doctor, whose sonic screwdriver rises in his hand before he embarrassedly pushes it back down in what is most definitely an erection joke, and by the camera which pans up from between her legs before she begins

fighting. These short two scenes are indicative of the rape culture in which we live and reinforces the sexualization and fetishization of women. To have a scene of sexual assault, committed by the Doctor no less, played for laughs in a family television show as hugely successful, and historically progressive, as *Doctor Who* sends the message to millions of children, teens, and adults that this is acceptable behavior. The sexualization of Jenny is made all the worse by the fact that she is a queer woman who has shown no interest in any man, yet alone the Doctor, and (as of the airing of this episode) has yet to be seen kissing her own wife<sup>xxv</sup>.

### CLARA OSWIN OSWALD— THE IMPOSSIBLE GIRL

Clara is a complicated companion in that she lived and died twice before being introduced as a full time companion on the show. She is initially problematic because she is shown to only be granted access to the Doctor's world because he has become obsessed with the mystery shrouding her, a mystery she knows nothing about and is not informed of until the end of her first season as companion. In this finale, Clara is finally allowed to know who she is to the Doctor, which results in her decision to sacrifice herself to save him with the repeated assertion that she "was born to save the Doctor<sup>xxvi</sup>." Again, Moffat has reduced the female companion to a secondary role, whose entire existence is shaped around the Doctor. Clara is denied any character growth or development during her time aboard the TARDIS, instead being shown as feisty and unimpressed by the Doctor while lacking any real agency of her own.

The first time the Doctor is introduced to Clara,<sup>19</sup> she is a

<sup>16</sup> Vastra is a Silurian, a fictional race of reptile-like humanoids

<sup>17</sup> *Doctor Who* 8.1, "Deep Breath"

<sup>18</sup> While this episode was nominated for the GLAAD 'Outstand Individual Episode (in a series without a regular LGBT character) award, I do not believe that said nomination detracts from the heteronormative lens through which the characters are written.

<sup>19</sup> In person. He previously interacted with a Dalek version of her in 7.1, "Asylum of the Daleks"; this version also died saving the Doctor.

barmaid in Victorian London. However, she is also revealed to be the governess to two children of a wealthy widower. This version of Clara dies by the end of the episode while saving the Doctor. The next incarnation of Clara is again shown in a nurturing role, this time as the nanny to a family in contemporary London. Despite these versions of Clara growing up in radically different societies, they have the same personality and are resigned to doing the same type of traditionally feminine work.

When the Doctor first meets contemporary Clara, he has already been shown to have met a younger version of her,<sup>20</sup> and clearly knows much more about her than she does about him. While Clara initially denies travel with the Doctor, she soon changes her mind but is still denied full agency due to the Doctor keeping valuable information from her, namely that there are multiple versions of her throughout history. Even after this “big reveal” in the series finale, the audience still knows very little about Clara. “It seems her entire role in the series is to provide a mystery for the Doctor to obsess over. [When] the Doctor reflects on his relationship with Clara [he] focuses on Clara’s mystery. He mentions only three qualities of hers: she’s funny, she’s brave, and she’s ‘perfect’<sup>21 xxvii</sup>.” Instead of being a full and complete person, Clara is repeatedly used as a plot device to further the Doctor’s character arc. “Clara brings the Doctor out of his post-Amy and Rory depression and gives him something to obsess over, before ultimately sacrificing herself to save him<sup>xxviii</sup>.” However, “we hardly see her do any actual *saving*. She falls through fire, appears in a variety of cute period

clothes, and waves desperately at various Doctors who have been edited in from Classic *Doctor Who* episodes<sup>xxix</sup>.” As opposed to showing Clara do any actual saving, we are instead witness to the Doctor jumping into his own time stream to save her, thus stripping her of any potential agency she may have had.<sup>22</sup>

In series eight, Clara is effectively a blank slate. No matter what happens to her or how much she may develop over the course of any given episode, she inevitably resorts back to her default template of “feisty” by the start of the next episode. The only constant throughout series eight is the newly regenerated Doctor negatively commenting on Clara’s physical appearance, or “negging” her.<sup>23</sup> Throughout the season, the Doctor calls Clara “an egomaniac, needy, game-player sort of person<sup>xxx</sup>” and a “control freak<sup>xxxi</sup>”; he describes her as being “sort of short and round-ish, but with a good personality<sup>xxxii</sup>”, “built like a man<sup>xxxiii</sup>”, and that “her face is so wide[,] she needs three mirrors<sup>xxxiv</sup>.” “Since [the Doctor] regenerated, he’s called [Clara] fat, old, implied she smells (it’s her perfume) and now can’t tell if she’s wearing make-up or not.<sup>xxxv</sup>” The Doctor is a character of authority; the “negging” of the female companion is vehemently sexist and, according to self-reports on Tumblr, has caused a rising discomfort with the show from young female viewers who now fear that the Doctor would insult them as well.

### COURTNEY WOODS AND THE “MARK OF THE PLURAL”

Series eight showed remarkable improvement in the number of significant characters of color, mostly black characters. However, nearly all of these characters only appear

in a single episode, most are killed off, and of the two reoccurring black characters, both are presented in racially insensitive ways. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam discuss in their essay *Stereotype, Realism, and the Struggle over Representation* that since “the ‘mark of the plural’ projects colonized people as ‘all the same,’ any negative behavior by any member of the oppressed community is instantly generalized as typical, as pointing to a perpetual backsliding toward some presumed negative essence<sup>xxxvi</sup>.” This season once again presents a young black girl, Courtney Woods, as a “disruptive influence” who challenges authority. Courtney does appear multiple times during the season, even traveling in the TARDIS for a short period. However, Courtney is perpetually in trouble with her teachers and is thusly “saved” by the benevolence of the white characters, namely Clara and the Doctor, mirroring the brief introduction of Mels in series seven. Every black youth introduced in this series, even just in passing, is portrayed as either a criminal or a “disruptive influence” to those around them. The repetitive representations of black youth as criminals or problems to society is incredibly problematic. Because each of the children are shown to be unruly, anti-authoritarian, and potentially dangerous, the “mark of the plural” indicates that “representation thus becomes allegorical<sup>xxxvii</sup>.” Ergo, by writing all of the young black children in a similar manner, Moffat is reiterating the tired racist tropes of the “savage” or “primitive negro,” “pointing to a perpetual backsliding toward some presumed negative essence<sup>xxxviii</sup>.” Courtney’s representation is

<sup>20</sup> During a minisode, the Doctor is seen stalking Clara’s timeline, once again meeting a future companion during their formative childhood years and thus imprinting himself onto their timeline.

<sup>21</sup> *Doctor Who* “She Said, He Said: A Prequel”

<sup>22</sup> *Doctor Who* 7.13 (How they exited the time stream remains unknown.)

<sup>23</sup> Negging is when a person, usually a man, insults or humiliates a woman as much as he can get away with in order to lower her self-esteem and try to get her to seek his approval, while establishing himself as being of higher authority and value. It’s a manipulative, yet common tactic established by so-called “pick-up artists.”



especially problematic when viewed through an intersectional lens. She is a young black girl who is deemed “unimportant” by the Doctor, despite him previously having said that “in nine hundred years of time and space and I’ve never met anybody who wasn’t important before<sup>xxxix</sup>.”

### MOFFAT THE MISOGYNIST

*Doctor Who* is a family show watched by millions of people. When a show such as this presents female characters without autonomy or agency, presents the Doctor as a sexual predator, and dismisses bisexuality as “just a phase<sup>xi</sup>,” it has power and influence over those watching. Moffat has repeatedly insulted women and minorities in interviews<sup>24</sup> and has allowed his personal biases to infiltrate a once beloved show. Episodes penned by him frequently fail the Bechdel test. His female characters are tepid at best and overtly sexualized at worst, and when confronted with his blatant sexism over the way he wrote Amy and River he insisted the opposite: “River Song? Amy Pond? Hardly weak women. It’s the exact opposite. You could accuse me of having a fetish for powerful, sexy women who love cheating people<sup>xli</sup>.” What Moffat seems to fail to understand is that him fetishizing women is not the same as respecting them, nor is it the same as writing well-developed, three-dimensional characters. Moffat has developed a version of the Doctor that, as a queer woman, I would be terrified to travel with. Moffat’s misogyny has allowed for the lack of agency, under-characterization, monism, and invasion of bodily autonomy of the female companions in ways significantly more problematic and sexist than during the show’s original run in 1963. Through his writing, Moffat is sending the very

clear message that he does not value women, nor their stories, and by having the Doctor, a character looked up to by millions, disregard women, Moffat is saying that we the audience shouldn’t care about or value women either.

Currently, all of the writers for *Doctor Who* are affluent white men. While it is true that not all women are feminists, and that women can uphold sexist ideology just as well as their male counterparts and therefore there is no guarantee that the addition of women writers would improve representation in *Doctor Who*, it can be inferred that due to the poor representation currently, the show would greatly benefit from diversifying the writer’s room. Moffat has repeatedly shown us that he cannot write nuanced female characters. He is constantly falling back on the same tired old tropes and has not proven himself to be receptive of criticism. Thus, I fully believe that the only solution to the “Moffat problem” is to replace him as showrunner with someone more capable of writing complex female characters. I do not know who that person should be. However, I do know that the show needs more women writers to help counter-balance the overabundance of men writers.

Representation in media matters. It influences the way people view those different from them, as well as how they view themselves. Lupita Nyong’o addressed this concept perfectly when she said in an interview that “until I saw people who looked like me, doing things I wanted to do, I wasn’t sure it was a possibility<sup>xlii</sup>.” It was due to seeing someone who looked like her that Lupita realized she could be an actor. These kind of realizations based off of the representation in media are common occurrences. Nyong’o was influenced by seeing Whoopi

Goldberg in *The Color Purple*; Goldberg was herself influenced to become an actress when she saw Nichelle Nichols in the original *Star Trek*<sup>xliii</sup>. More connected to *Doctor Who*, both David Tennant and Peter Capaldi were huge fans of the show growing up, and Tennant was influenced to become an actor in order to one day play the Doctor<sup>xliiv</sup>. Thus, by continuing to allow subpar and offensive representations of women and minorities on the show, Moffat is alienating large communities of people who may have otherwise been influenced to do great things based on the heroics of the Doctor and companions. The show has proven itself to be better in the past, and I have hope that it will become more inclusive again in the future. By analyzing the numerous intertextual problems in Moffat’s representation of women and minorities, and highlighting the ways in which his writing has hindered the enjoyment of such a beloved show, I truly hope to aid in both academic and fandom discussions of the show. By using the academic concepts explored above, I aim to enrich the average fan’s critical understanding of the show. In the same way, by using my position within the fandom, I hope to aid in the decentering of academic and critical feminist media analysis to include discourses found on popular websites such as Tumblr. By blurring together these two seemingly opposing viewpoints in my discussion of representation in Moffat-era *Doctor Who*, my goal is to show that academic and popular discourses are not so different after all and can in fact greatly benefit from each other when conducting media analysis research.

<sup>24</sup> A semi-complete list of his interviews and quotes can be found at <http://feministwhoniverse.tumblr.com/post/25598314408/steven-moffat-is-a-douchebag-the-masterlist>

## Notes

- <sup>i</sup> Geek Feminism Wikia
- <sup>ii</sup> Helford, Pg. 13-14
- <sup>iii</sup> Chambers, pg. 35. Emphasis in original.
- <sup>iv</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>v</sup> Britton, Pg. 135
- <sup>vi</sup> Ibid. Pg. 136
- <sup>vii</sup> Ibid. Pg. 137
- <sup>viii</sup> Mulvey, Pg. 9-10. Emphasis added.
- <sup>ix</sup> *Doctor Who* 5.1
- <sup>x</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xi</sup> Flesh and Stone Confidential
- <sup>xii</sup> feministwhoniverse.tumblr
- <sup>xiii</sup> *Doctor Who* 6.6
- <sup>xiv</sup> Nesbitt
- <sup>xv</sup> *Doctor Who* 7.1
- <sup>xvi</sup> Coleman
- <sup>xvii</sup> *Doctor Who* 6.12
- <sup>xviii</sup> *Doctor Who* 6.8
- <sup>xix</sup> *Doctor Who* 7.5
- <sup>xx</sup> Scotsman.com
- <sup>xxi</sup> *Doctor Who* 2012 Christmas special
- <sup>xxii</sup> *Doctor Who* 7.1

- <sup>xxiii</sup> Leopard
- <sup>xxiv</sup> *Doctor Who* 7.11
- <sup>xxv</sup> Boleyn
- <sup>xxvi</sup> *Doctor Who* 7.13
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Alyssa
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xxix</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xxx</sup> *Doctor Who* 8.1
- <sup>xxxi</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xxxii</sup> *Doctor Who* 8.2
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> *Doctor Who* 8.4
- <sup>xxxv</sup> Welsh
- <sup>xxxvi</sup> Shohat and Stam, Pg. 805
- <sup>xxxvii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xxxviii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xxxix</sup> *Doctor Who* 2010 Christmas Special
- <sup>xl</sup> *Doctor Who* 7.1
- <sup>xli</sup> Jeffries
- <sup>xlii</sup> Staff
- <sup>xliii</sup> Hart
- <sup>xliv</sup> IMDb

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